

**“Xplode the prison/ burn the clock”: Tracing Black British Literary Aesthetics from the  
Shores of the Caribbean to the Streets of South London**

Research Thesis

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## Introduction

Only in recent years has the amount of literary scholarship on hip hop and rap exploded producing a general acceptance that these black authored aural texts are indeed poetry. Hip Hop and Rap benefit from critical study that examines their dynamic political affiliations, symbiotic relationships with artistic movements, and most notably their increasing transnationality.

However, it seems that the same scholarly attention is lacking for black cultural production just across the Atlantic. Black Britons have been responsible for influencing, if not birthing, some of the most distinctly English sounds of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Their work presents a synthesis of sound and written language similar to that of black American poets whose work is also founded on the oral tradition. Therefore, a comparable pluralism must undergird black British poetry at the present leading towards the inseparable unification of music and poetry.

However, there is a dearth of scholarship that seeks to connect this current moment to the history of black poetics in the UK, which exists within a larger framework of postcolonial nation building and identity negotiation within the “parent nation.” This paper will chart the evolution of black London’s investments in poetic pluralism, i.e. the assessment and reassessment of black poetry’s necessary constituents. Further, it will investigate the politics of the resulting and distinct literary aesthetics that arise in the quest to create space for black creatives in Britain.

Tracking the literary origins of each musical genre present in Britain’s current soundscape would prove exhausting if not futile. Britain’s imperial history and the resulting immigration from various colonized states produced a black English population that is extremely diverse to the present. To claim that UK Grime, House, Garage, or Funky have any singular source would be reductive if not ill-informed of the colonial legacy that bred the complex,

politically charged identifier—Black Briton<sup>1</sup>. However, on this subject, it is useful to examine historical literary and political organization that have taken up these issues and fostered an interdisciplinary approach to nation-building.

The Caribbean Artists Movement (**CAM**) seems at least one link in a wide network of roots for the confluence of sound and language amongst Black Britons' cultural productions. CAM, emerged as a method for West Indian, if not more broadly "Black," cultural and political organizing in the UK between 1966 and 1972. Indeed, the movement's founders, Edward (later Kamau) Brathwaite, John La Rose, and Andrew Salkey participated in several West Indian cooperatives in London throughout the 1950s and 1960s. However, none had quite the impact as CAM despite its infrequent appearance in historical analysis. Although, CAM's founders were scholars and intellectuals, the movement included former students turned artists, writers and political agitators, and, increasingly toward the end of the campaign, West Indians who had immigrated to perform low-wage labor following the Second World War (*The Caribbean Artists Movement* xvii). Although the organization began in the spirit of reactivity to "generations of European cultural domination," it took on a proactive quality renegotiating the isolationist identity of the West Indian in "exile" and refashioning it into a pan-Caribbean and also pan-Africanist model that would bridge the gaps present in London's black community at the time (xviii). The Caribbean Artists Movement's emphasis on creative camaraderie across

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<sup>1</sup> Recently, the term "Black Briton" has come under fire. In the United Kingdom, the identifier "black" is increasingly considered to be "offensive." Toyin Agbetu, a British journalist argues, "progressive Britons and others should use the term *African British* to designate British citizens of African heritage or racial backgrounds" (Arana ix). However, for the purposes of this analysis, I will be using "black" and Black in order to trace the historical links between the Caribbean Artists Movement, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, and James Massiah. CAM and Brathwaite were invested in fostering a collective racial identity in Britain for which they used the identifier "black." Therefore, I find its use necessary to my argument though I acknowledge the controversy.

socioeconomic boundaries based on a black national language resonates today in ways that become apparent in the study of James Massiah. However, the most important product of this proactivity, is the movement's export of the Calypsonian writer and thinker. It is the reincarnation and re-negotiation of the Calypsonian's role that constitutes a more concrete aural link between the Caribbean Artists Movement and the present day.

Edward Kamau Brathwaite, a founder of CAM and one of the Caribbean's foremost scholars/poets, becomes instrumental to defining and modeling the literary Calypsonian's role in the context of transition and translation. Edward Brathwaite's work often considers issues of colonial language as the medium for West Indian expression. He is responsible for coining the term "nation language," which is an alternative term to "dialect" (Brown 8). That is to say, it is English uttered with all the characteristics of Caribbean speech. Brathwaite says, "English it may be in terms of its lexicon, but it is not English in terms of its syntax" ("English in the Caribbean" 21). This term revolutionized literary, sociological, and historical study of the Anglophone Caribbean. His poetry, an exemplar of "nation language" is grounded not only in orality but also in musicality—as Brathwaite produced jazz poetry as a means of colonial resistance, and later cultivated a sound more linked to the Caribbean as a means of nation building. While Brathwaite's jazz poetry has often been lauded as the advent of "an alternative Caribbean aesthetic," his personal and professional investments in calypso have been largely ignored (Louis James qtd in Brown 9). Transcripts of his talks from the first and second meetings of the Caribbean Artists Movement demonstrate that calypso was integral to his demonstrated use of "nation language." I argue that calypso constitutes the synthesized product of West Indian jazz and poetry, more generally music and literature. In this sense, calypso becomes more than a

musical form originating from Trinidad. Instead, the genre transcends into a political mechanism for the disruption of colonial artistic norms—blurring the lines between music and literature, challenging who and what we perceive to be legitimately English. Brathwaite’s involvement in the Caribbean Artists Movement and its emphasis on facilitating a greater Black British identity, allows for the transnational application of these concepts central to the West Indian experience to black creative production in Britain more generally.

As Brathwaite and others involved in CAM busied themselves laying the foundation for an emergent Black British literary identity that shattered English norms, black poetic standards were reset as a result. Lauri Ramey claims that these standards have persisted to the present moment as there are “a range of conventional notions limiting what ‘black’ British poetry should look like, sound like, and be about” (Ramey 79). She claims, “those preconceived ideas reinforce racial stereotypes, create a distorted view of ‘black’ poets as not being engaged in all areas of literary dialogue and influence, and deprive some of the more experimental ‘black’ British poets of recognition, if not, in fact, of creative agency” (Ramey 79). These confines to black creativity present a contemporary environment of transition and redefinition which is arguably similar to Brathwaite’s and CAM’s situation. James Massiah, current London poet aged 27, takes up issues stereotypically associated with the black community and black literature, and he challenges them by employing a certain “poetic avant-garde.” Lauri Ramey provides a definition of the poetic avant-garde as an aesthetic enterprise grounded in the rejection of poetic convention by the “exploitation of formal properties” in order to engender, what she terms, a new “creative agency” (Ramey 79). I argue that Massiah’s work, exemplary of Ramey’s theory of the contemporary “‘Black’ British poetic avant-garde,” continues the work of Edward Kamau

Brathwaite, who was also concerned with creating new space for black poets who were subject to a rigid standard. However, Massiah's significance extends beyond the simple preservation of Brathwaite's efforts.

Massiah's work redefines the avant-garde ideal established years earlier because it does not subscribe to any set definition of poetry; definitions, of course, were extremely important to the previous generation as they marked the borders of their new nation. Although Brathwaite's poetry has a demonstrated aural quality that marks its relation to jazz and reggae, his verse is still firmly rooted to the page and expressed through language with the aid of sound. However, Massiah's work demonstrates a pronounced fluidity in that he does not require music in his poetic space, but welcomes it, and vice versa. During his live performances, Massiah embodies the role of both poet and DJ (sometimes employing other DJs)—spinning his own tracks under the recitation of his verse. This is a fresh form of literary expression that is marked by a mutual intelligibility between sound and verse. For Massiah, the fluidity is not only apparent in the convergence of sound and verse but also in their isolation. Sometimes, Massiah recites poetry acoustically, and sometimes he merely DJs. However, this does not diminish his role as poet, and should not fetter him with any extraneous titles—be those “spoken word artist,” “performance poet,” etc. Instead, Massiah demonstrates that black poetics can uniformly occupy the realm of both written/spoken language and music.

Edward Kamau Brathwaite uses the Caribbean Artists Movement as a platform to introduce the confluence of sound and language into emerging expressions of Black British identity resulting in a new black literary aesthetic. As a result, Brathwaite and CAM were responsible for the inception of the literary Calypsonian who could render the political

exigencies of the musical form through poetry. James Massiah, in the present moment, demonstrates the longevity of Brathwaite's ideal literary Calypsonian by contending with its characterization. However, he simultaneously decries the rigidity of its formal bounds, and creates new room for black poetics to thrive without confinement to any potentially limiting set of standards.

# **I. The Caribbean Artists Movement, Calypso, and the Foundations of a New Black Literary Aesthetic**

Brathwaite on the West Indian critic's relevance and responsibilities:

[O]ur literary criticism is really meaningless unless it is grounded in historical psycho-analysis; because what our writers are witnesses of—thanks to their especial sensibilities and powers of expression—is the effect of cultural catastrophe on the west indian mind and action...and the point of our literature is that we are describing spectres on a scale of value/movement, without being aware of the total graph or plan. (“Metaphors of Underdevelopment: A Proem for Hernan Cortez” 459)

It is necessary to note that while this analysis considers the definition and redefinition of a black British literary aesthetic from the mid-20th century and onwards, there is a much longer history of black writing in Britain generally and London specifically. The histories of prominent black writers in London such as Olaudah Equiano, Ignatius Sancho, and Mary Seacole contradict contemporary narratives that mark the advent of black Britain with the arrival of the SS Windrush in 1948 (Bryan 63). Verily, the acknowledgement of a more extensive history of black British writing presents several complications because early black British writers were engaged in self-negotiation within the context of slavery and early abolition. This subject does not explicitly frame later writers' work, but it provides the historical context for the issues of “restlessness...and..rootlessness” in the West Indian quest for belonging, as Glyne Griffith puts it (Griffith 75).



In effect, the political nature of early black writing laid the foundation for the later genesis of a broader black British identity translated into poetry and modeled through transnational literary organizing. Judith Bryan transports the relevance of these literary antecedents through time claiming that the former have been critical to the development of the latter. She states, “By examining the social context in which [early black writers’] work was written, I hope to show that...Black Londoners have played pivotal roles in [Britain’s] histories. And today’s black British writers are not unaware of the fact” (Bryan 64). Indeed, Brathwaite, specifically, abhors the disregard for historicity in the case of West Indian writing and criticism. Glyne Griffith provides insightful analysis to the earlier passage from Brathwaite’s “Metaphors of Underdevelopment.” He states, “Brathwaite...eschews ahistorical criticism...[T]he creative and critical transformation of oppression and marginalization into a signification system that foregrounds its own autonomy through historical disinterestedness, tends to promote the word as fetish. Such creative and critical practice reifies the word as signifier without responsibility to a signified, and represents the word as the world but not in it” (Griffith 79). Bryan illuminates Brathwaite’s case for an essential historical conversation that extends the experience of the individual, the author and also signifier, to the the community, the signified. Community is critical to the understanding of Brathwaite’s philosophy—especially, community relating to African heritage. That said, it becomes essential to define who is actually signified by the West Indian poet, given that colonial relationships complicated the simple black-white racial dynamic in both the Caribbean and Britain. In addition, the West Indian quest for belonging and the synthesis of a black identity in Britain do not exactly possess a one-to-one relationship.

Precise attention to the diversity of experience and color in the Caribbean does not detract from the West Indian poet's orientation towards a black awareness at home and in the diaspora but rather constitutes the anti-colonial basis of an emerging movement. In order to preserve an attention to historical detail as Brathwaite requires of any effective literary historian, it should be noted that when considering black British identity, which arises in large part out of a West Indian black awareness, there does not exist a simple black/white binary. In Kobena Mercer's article "'Diaspora Didn't Happen in a Day': Reflections on Aesthetics and Time," she states, "What makes post-1945 British blackness distinctive is the overlapping of three ex-colonial diasporas—from the Caribbean, the Indian subcontinent and West Africa" (Mercer 74). She continues, "Whichever way the triangle is sliced—by demography or by disciplinarity—it points to 'black Britain' as a bounded formation that emerged as a late-twentieth-century site of multiple and overlapping diasporas" (Mercer 74). To ignore the manufactured link between the diversity of the Caribbean and the various shades that freckle the face of Britain mid-century, is to disregard a portion of the Caribbean Artists Movement's membership many of whom were, in fact, non-black people of color. These racial differences did not dilute the project of Brathwaite, La Rose, and Salkey—CAM's founding members. At the first meeting in February of 1967 at Brathwaite's London flat, the scholar and poet gave a talk that oriented discussions to follow towards an exploration of new musical directions in West Indian writing and provided the form's essential link with blackness. In this talk, he considers the significance of blackness to the musicality of West Indian prose. Copy of Braithwaite's talk reads: "Jazz is one medium; literary expression another. And not all West Indian artists are negro. But to make 'sense,' they have to write about their society, which is predominately negro. And taken all together we can, I think,

begin to discern certain fundamental elements and essences in these different media—jazz and literature” (Brathwaite qtd in GPI CAM 5/1/3 p1). Here, Brathwaite begins to expose the threads of a tapestry he weaves through his deliberate poetics and, notably, through his organizing with CAM. For Brathwaite, blackness emerges as a thread equal in importance to the elements of jazz and literature. Not only does this preliminary session solidify Brathwaite’s objective to cultivate racial cohesion through his unique brand of literature, it also crosses creative professional boundaries which had been exacerbated by the British colonial project. Anne Walmsley, in her article “A Sense of Community: Kamau Brathwaite and the Caribbean Artists Movement,” claims, “for Brathwaite at least, one of CAM’s main objectives was to counteract what he saw as a tendency towards individualism amongst his fellow Caribbean writers” (“A Sense of Community” 101). With this, he seeks to found a community consciousness based on the African model, which prefers the collective to the singular. Bridget Jones, author of “‘The unity is submarine’: aspects of a pan-Caribbean consciousness in the work of Kamau Brathwaite,” says, “With most complexity in [Brathwaite’s] poetry he can create cycles of allusive patterning which reconnect West Africa with the rituals and spiritual traditions on ‘the other shore’” (Jones 87). The “other shore” mentioned, of course, refers to the Caribbean, but I argue that through CAM, Brathwaite crafts a pattern that includes yet another shore—the British Isles. On this account, Brathwaite and CAM’s mission can be said to build on the thesis Judith Bryan proposed for the trajectory of black literature in Britain more contemporarily. Bryan states, “In recent decades...black Britons have had an opportunity to reevaluate our contribution to the making of a nation and to place our contribution in its proper context” (Bryan 64). With the proper context, it is apparent that Brathwaite and CAM endeavored to attach nationalist

associations—those pertaining to the deliberately cultivated black creative community in London—to work that followed their philosophies.

This exercise in nation-building is dualistic in the context of the Caribbean Artists Movement. Bryan's definition points to the significance of more contemporary writers to greater British literary history despite their exclusion from national discourse. Of course, these contributions are not to be minimized. However, there is a more reflexive nationalistic development at work mid-century, as previously indicated through Brathwaite and CAM's support of racial and creative collectivism. Similarly, Edward Kamau Brathwaite's personal work reflects the negotiation of the ex-colonial subject's identity in opposition to the colonial power but also independent of it as the West Indian artist asserts sovereignty over the self while the nation secures self-governance. The Caribbean Artists Movement (1966-1972) again becomes a platform for this agenda evident in his personal work at this "time of crossroads" leading up to and during the "decade of Independence" (qtd in *Caribbean Artists Movement* xvii). Indeed, an ex-colonial relationship supports the racial cohesion championed by Brathwaite and others under the term "black," making an anti-colonial orientation an essential part of blackness and therefore West Indian literature. However, the history leading up to the founding of CAM further demonstrates why poetry becomes the site of anti-colonial struggle and therefore the instrument for defining a new black identity in the British Isles that was legible across creative professional boundaries, socioeconomic levels, and nationalism of the individual countries of origin.

While the Caribbean Artists Movement was generally construed as an alliance between Caribbean writers and visual artists, it cannot be denied that its founding leadership occupied

themselves mainly in poetic endeavors and literary critique—a material reflection of poetry as the medium for colonial dissent. Much of this is due to the early institutionalization of black literature in Britain. Prior to CAM, there were a few outlets for black cultural production in the UK. In the 1950s, one of the most prominent proponents for black arts was BBC Caribbean Service’s *Caribbean Voices*— a radio publication program that Anne Walmsley has deemed “in effect a fledgling school in creative writing, and a broad-based literary club” (*Caribbean Artists Movement* 11) . In fact, several of CAM’s founding members including Brathwaite were featured on *Caribbean Voices*. Of the publishing market in Britain at the time, which included *Caribbean Voices*, Anne Walmsley states:

Would-be writers arriving in Britain from the Caribbean in the 1950s found a range of opportunities and encouragement open to them, especially if they lived in London. Book publishing was experiencing something of a postwar boom; small, young publishing houses were eager to bring out work by fresh, vigorous, new voices from far corners of the Commonwealth, especially those who used English with the fluency, individuality and verve of West Indians. (*The Caribbean Artists Movement* 11)

Therefore, demonstrated fluency in English by nationals of various Commonwealth countries was encouraged by British institutions. It is possible to attribute this fervor for West Indian writing in Britain to a certain colonial sentimentality. This theory is bolstered by the general lack of excitement surrounding West Indian visual art leading to a lack of immigrating visual artists. Anne Walmsley clearly locates this disdain for the visual arts in the Islands. “At school in the Caribbean, art was a soft option, a non-academic subject, with none of the status of English,

whose language and literature were central to the British colonial heritage” (*The Caribbean Artists Movement* 14). This attitude in the Caribbean illustrates a greater phenomenon that perhaps underlies the British zeal for a certain type of West Indian writing. Writing of this sort predicted a lasting colonial legacy after the collapse of empire. Again, in the early- to mid-1950s, a certain ideal prevailed defining the “correct” black writing—one ungoverned by actual West Indians. Brathwaite says of a novella he attempted to publish: “They hit me down before I cd even get started w/ the rejection of the novella *The Boy & the Sea* written while still at Cambridge 1953-5, because it did not conform to the stereotype of Caribb prose fiction they had already established” (letter to Elaine Savory, 1 November 1992 qtd in Brown 226). In several ways, before the development of CAM and the subsequent major publications of Brathwaite, West Indian writing in Britain could be interpreted as establishment rhetoric despite the slight anti-colonial undertones that some of the work featured on *Caribbean Voices*.<sup>2</sup> This background leading up to the inauguration of CAM explains the prevalence of poetry as a medium of dissent in the introduction of an anti-colonial but also anti-establishment black identity that speaks not only to artists but translates across the spectrum of diversity in the black community.

Edward Kamau Brathwaite’s work as a founder of CAM overlapped with his growing poetic and political sensibilities allowing for his rhetoric championing a new critical theory to gain relevance. Scholars and students of Brathwaite’s oeuvre agree on three concerns that shape

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<sup>2</sup> Several dialect (nation language) poets, were critical of alternative approaches to their craft. It was generally accepted at the time that there were two methods for the West Indian poet to achieve his goal: “either he masters the European cultural tradition so thoroughly that he can then do with it what he will” or “he makes use of the dialect tradition, which has always been present but was until recently rejected by West Indian intellectuals” (*Caribbean Artists Movement* 105). Those who subscribe to the former method, such as Derek Walcott, were embraced on programs like *Caribbean Voices*. Often the criticism of colonial power was lost on listeners, due to the mastery and use of the unaltered colonial tongue, therefore diluting some of the potency of the argument (*Caribbean Artists Movement* 12).

nearly all of his work: “Africa, jazz, and issues around a West Indian poets use of language” (Brown 9). As previously indicated, these three concerns are intimately connected—each part of the pattern in the tapestry which seeks to wrap seemingly dissimilar black individuals in Britain in a collective identity. Brathwaite uses CAM as a site for the unveiling of the critical lens through which the audience is to interpret the fibers linking these elements. Because blackness has been established as a thread equal in importance to the others, it cannot be the language by which one can read and understand the marriage of these components. In a talk Brathwaite gave at a CAM meeting on the 3 February 1967 entitled “The West Indian Jazz Novel,” Brathwaite introduces the elements which he weaves into the fabric of his later prose, poetry, and *proetry*. He states, “It is in the new literary elements in the calypso...and the...structures of West Indian poetry and novels, that we can find a connection, (or rather a correspondence) between jazz...and a West Indian negro expression based on Africa” (“Extracts from ‘The West Indian Jazz Novel’” 1). This passage is significant because it illustrates that Brathwaite believes calypso to be the product of the marriage, evidence of the bond, between West Indian black poetry and music, jazz in particular. At subsequent meetings, it became apparent that this concept had gained some footing as others began to think along these lines—Gordon Rohlehr, Caribbean scholar, states that he views Sam Selvon, author of the famed *The Lonely Londoners*, something of a “calypso novelist.” Further Rohlehr states that he is interested in tracing the similarities between calypso and dialect verse (“Talk by Gordon Rohlehr on Sparrow and The Language of The Calypso” 2). In essence, calypso becomes a primary method for defining the orientation towards the creation of a black british identity in the work of West Indian writers, as it makes legible the various concerns of Brathwaite and others involved in CAM.

The relationship between calypso and West Indian writing bears more sophistication than the simple approximation of word to tune exhibiting a correlation in function over form. As convinced as Brathwaite seems of calypso's kinship with West Indian writing, he does not provide as much evidence to support his claim as other writers of the period may have liked. In "The West Indian Jazz Novel" talk, Brathwaite points to one aspect of calypso's form that concretely relates to West Indian writing. He says, "In calypso the musical and literary elements form an inseparable whole"; a quality of what he terms the "West Indian jazz novel" where "word, image, rhythm and improvisation" are central to the structure ("Extracts from 'The West Indian Jazz Novel'" 2) . This is where his consideration of calypso ends (although he comes back to the concept some years later). For some, most notably V.S. Naipaul, this linear association of form does not compute to an equivalency. Naipaul's chief concern lies in the nationalistic origins of the musical genre. Naipaul states in *The Middle Passage*:

The calypso is a purely local form. No song composed outside Trinidad is a calypso. The calypso deals with local incidents, local attitudes and it does so in a local language. The pure calypso, the best calypso, is incomprehensible to the outsider-wit and verbal conceits are fundamental. Without them, no song, however good the music, however well sung, can be judged a calypso. (Naipaul qtd in "Talk by Gordon Rohlehr on Sparrow and The Language of The Calypso" 2)

While Naipaul and others have rejected the possibility of a calypso originating from outside of Trinidad's borders and beyond the imaginations of its citizens, the qualifications that he submits for the constitution of a "true calypso" bear some relevance. Brathwaite and, therefore, CAM's



poetic nation-building project addresses the basic requirements Naipaul enumerates—including an attention to “local incidents, local attitudes, and...local language” (Naipaul qtd in “Talk by Gordon Rohlehr on Sparrow and The Language of The Calypso” 2). Further, in “‘We Getting the Kaiso That We Deserve’: Calypso and the World Music Market,” Gordon Rohlehr states that Calypsonians express “a concern for cultural self-definition and beyond that a more ominous concern for the future of the culture in the face of forces of erosion, appropriation, indifference, the neglect of artists and other cultural workers, the absence of any coherent cultural policy, and the pressure from external cultural influences powerfully promoted by the foreign media” (Rohlehr 83). There seems to be a strong correlation between the work of Brathwaite and calypso, as he states there is on the whole for West Indian writing. Through his work with CAM, he has articulated a case for “cultural self-definition,” a concerted effort to include all artists despite the prevalence of poetry in anti-colonial expressions, and the attempt to synthesize a “coherent cultural policy.” Therefore, calypso parallels in function over form. Rather than claiming a strict adherence to the specific aural qualities of calypso that arise out of Trinidad, Brathwaite instead demonstrates that calypso provides an apt framework for understanding the political exigencies of his specific brand of jazz (plus a few other genres of music) and poetry and the mission of CAM in general. In fact, the dissociation of the literary calypso from the fervent Trinidadian nationalism its original form is steeped in speaks to the mission of CAM in furthering this new direction in broader black writing in Britain.

## II. Edward Kamau Brathwaite and the Archetype of the Literary Calypsonian

As a pioneer of the literary calypso and jazz poetry, Brathwaite received a disproportionate amount of criticism. Louis James cites other scholars who have denounced Brathwaite's brand of poetry because his "Jazz Poems" fail at "attempting to recreate the sound of jazz" because, in essence, "words are not music" (James 70). These objections have at least some merit. Categorically, words are not music, as scholar Michael Dash so eagerly points out. But, as Louis James says in defense of Brathwaite, "The poems make no attempt to directly reproduce sound effects, nor do they give a conspectus of the achievement of jazz" (James 70). Of course, James' support of Brathwaite's project as one that is distinctly literary falls in line with my analysis which seeks to shift attention away from the melodic formalities of the genre towards a critical examination of the texts' function using calypso as framework. However, Brathwaite's verse does mimic to some extent not only jazz, but also reggae, ska, and even calypso creating, in effect, a set of formal requirements for black West Indian verse.

Brathwaite's first major trilogy, *The Arrivants*, was published in 1973, after his tenure as secretary of CAM. Of course, the contemporaneous composition of the trilogies composite parts, which act as a sustained historical narrative of the forced exodus from the African continent, and Brathwaite's creative organizing begs the reader to consider this text as a product of this poetic nationalism championing the amalgamation of a black British identity during his CAM years. With this text, Brathwaite embarks on a journey of cultural realization evidenced by the evolution of musical referents in the text. The following excerpt from a 1990 interview with Brathwaite conducted by Nathaniel Mackey delineates the trajectory of Brathwaite's musical development from 1973 near to the turn of the 21st century:

**Mackey:** The early poems show the impact of jazz, as I've said. How much of that has to do with a sense of it as a kind of outlaw music?

**Brathwaite:** Could be. It's a sense of alternative anyway and it was the music that made sense to *me*. That was the music I grew up with, music that I personally discovered—let's put it that way—and it immediately made sense to me. But don't forget that this is in the absence, in Barbados, of folk music, of the living enjambment of folk song. And what you see in the early work is the alternative music giving me an alternative riddim, as it were, but as I get to know more about the Caribbean the emphasis shifts from jazz to the Caribbean, to calypso, to reggae, to our folk music, to the (religious) music connected with the *hounfour*, so that it appears to be a moving away from jazz, as it is, in one sense, and an effort to explore more fully the nature, the musical patterns, of the local scene... ("An Interview with Kamau Brathwaite" 29)

Brathwaite's response to Mackey illuminates the correlation between the development of a musical identity and that of a distinct literary aesthetic. His description of the shift toward "our folk music" where there previously was none is chiefly important. Brathwaite's early reliance on jazz illustrates the initial goal, which was to sever the colonial tie by any means necessary even when that includes importing the language to do so. Louis James might call this an extension of "the process...of appropriation and self discovery," which he uses to define Brathwaite's fascination with the African drum (James 68). That said, Brathwaite's movement away from jazz as the primary voice of the Caribbean 'folk', as he says, toward more West Indian expressions clarifies the importance of the form of his poetry in the distillation of a national identity.

Trinidadian poet, playwright, and major player in the foundation of the Jamaican derivative of CAM, Marina Maxwell, uses Frantz Fanon as a framework to push her thesis on the “cultural guerillas.” (*Caribbean Artists Movement* 197). These “cultural guerillas” were those who furthered the movement away from protest literature towards a national culture” (197). Further she claims that these “political playwrights and poets [were]...beginning to write like this because they [were] more or less involved and committed to their societies” (197). While she was a fan of Brathwaite’s work, Maxwell does not enumerate Brathwaite explicitly amongst the “cultural guerillas”—though she does list Derek Walcott, who had oft been criticized by dialect (nation language) poets (197). However, I find that Maxwell’s theory of the “cultural guerilla” easily maps onto the literary Calypsonian Brathwaite introduced. The definition of Maxwell’s “cultural guerilla” exposes the means by which Brathwaite’s literary calypso can be read as an expression of nation language.

To begin with the end, the final poem in Brathwaite’s *The Arrivants* focalizes the necessary link between calypso and nation language by foregrounding an archetypical representation of the Calypsonian as the progenitor of a coherent black aesthetic. *The Arrivants* is divided in a linear fashion featuring three sections—“Rights of Passage,” “Masks,” and “Islands”—which each explore a different phase in the history of the African diaspora. The conclusion to “Jou’veert,”<sup>3</sup> the final poem in *The Arrivants*, are as follows:

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<sup>3</sup>Alternate spellings depending on source: j’ouvert, jou ouvè, jou ouvert, jour ouvert, or jouvert. This analysis will observe Brathwaite’s spelling “jou’veert” to maintain consistency with the primary source.

watching in the Lent-

en morning  
hurts for-

gotten, hearts  
no longer bound

to black and bitter  
ashes in the ground

now waking  
making

making  
with their

rhythms some-  
thing torn

And new (*The Arrivants* 269-270)

Here, Brathwaite ends with the beginning. To provide some context: Jou'vert (translation: daybreak) is originally a Trinidadian celebration, likely meant to honor ancestors, which commences before dawn ahead of Carnival Tuesday (Cowley 138, 175). The festivities of Jou'vert are closely related to the development of the calypso, as the Carnival revelers are almost invariably followed by masqueraders performing calypso (Cowley 166). This speaks to the physical events of "Jou'vert"—the "Lenten morning"<sup>4</sup> and the "rhythms" that Brathwaite refers to. However, this context also suggests an alignment with the calypso as a political instrument in

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<sup>4</sup> According to John Cowley, Carnival is both a sacred and secular festival due to Roman Catholic influence over slaves from French settlements on the island of Trinidad during the late 16th century (Cowley 8). As such, Carnival, a festival of music and dance stemming from enslaved peoples' African heritage, begins the day prior to Shrove Tuesday/Fat Tuesday—therefore the jubilee lasts for two full days prior to the start of Lent (Cowley 7, 8).

the formation of a black aesthetic. Brathwaite denotes “rhythm,” here defined as calypso, as a mechanism for transition. This “rhythm” arising out of the hearts of those previously limited to the “black and bitter/ ashes in the ground” creates that thing which is both “torn” and “new.” Brathwaite’s choice of words speaks to the fragmentation of the nation that has just been born—like daybreak, the sun split over the horizon but with the expectation of its coming fullness. Likewise, the calypso functioned historically as an implement for the construction of a cohesive Trinidadian identity as Afro-Indian racial discord shook the island during the 20th century (Regis 10). Louis Regis writes of Trinidad in the early 1960s, “It seems clear from the determined avowals of racial unity and the urgent appeals for racial solidarity that the issue of race relations was perceived as the greatest obstacle to national unity...Given the national paranoia on this topic...one must compliment the Calypsonian for at least trying to establish an ideal to which the nation should strive” (Regis 18). On this account, calypso, originally, a tool of dissent and a means for protest, now becomes the language by which an emerging black consciousness can be articulated. Further, Brathwaite’s “Jou’vert” clearly outlines the relevance of the poet, the Calypsonian, as the instigator of this conversation. For he states that it is from “hearts no longer bound/ to black and bitter/ ashes in the ground” that these rhythms manifest something new (*The Arrivants* 269-270). Surely, this can be read as a reference to the trauma of slavery’s legacy out of which a new nation was born. However, I argue that this can also be read as the production of a new consciousness outside of the geographical limitations of the nation-state which had further contributed to divisions amongst West Indians. Brathwaite thinks trans-racially and trans-nationally toward a new pan-Caribbean consciousness rooted in the black African model of community. After all, Carnival, Jou’vert, and therefore calypso are not only

confined to Trinidad. In fact, they each carry a trans-national, global resonance. Furthermore, the indication that calypso is only a tool for unification, it forces one to consider those “hearts” that birthed it—those agents of its proliferation. In a talk given at Cambridge in 1979, Brathwaite says of the English that is actually spoken in the Caribbean: “English it certainly is not in terms of its rhythm and timbre, its own sound explosion. In its contours, it is not English, even though the words, as you hear them, would be English to a greater or lesser degree. And this brings us back to the question...: can English be a revolutionary language” (“English in the Caribbean” 21). Brathwaite responds to the question he reiterated, “It is not English that is the agent. It is not the language, but people, who make revolutions” (“English in the Caribbean” 21). Thereby, the final poem in *The Arrivants*, “Jou’veert,” functions as a bridge between calypso and nation-language, and it initiates a conversation between the literary Calypsonian and the nation.

The overlay of calypso and nation language proves useful as the “difficulties” of Brathwaite’s jazz poem—seemingly excessive fragmentation and at times nearly indecipherable intertextuality—become legible under the microscope of the calypso. Brathwaite rather officially defines “nation language” as “the submerged area of [English] dialect that is much more allied to the African aspect of experience in the Caribbean” (“English in the Caribbean” 21). He continues, “It may be in English but often it is in an English which is like a howl, or a shout, or a machine-gun, or the wind, or a wave” (“English in the Caribbean” 21). Sure enough, these elements of Caribbean English align thematically with the linguistic charge of *The Arrivants*—the sea and water, in “Dawn” for example, issue liberating words as the narrator says of the rising sun, “I see you, my wound-/ed gift giver of sea/ spoken syllables: words salt on your lips/on my lip” (*The Arrivants* 238). Not only does the biting nature of the briny word point to

the text's intended use in the resistance to white power structures, it also describes the effect of its aural and orality in the birth of a new Caribbean consciousness. Brathwaite's poem, "Negus," also located in "Islands," exhibits heavy fragmentation as witness to the reality of Brathwaite's theory of nation language. A portion of "Negus" follows:

It  
it  
it  
it is not

it is not  
it is not  
it is not enough  
it is not enough to be free  
of the red white and blue  
of the drag, of the dragon

it is not  
it is not  
it is not enough  
it is not enough to be free  
of the whips, principalities and powers  
where is your kingdom of the Word? (*The Arrivants* 222)

Of course, this sort of disjointed repetition is typical of Brathwaite's work, and sometimes reads as opaque in both meaning and function. However, this passage from "Negus" is key as it locates the significance of fragmentation in the birth of nation language. Nathaniel Mackey reminds the reader of Brathwaite's adamant that "postcolonial speech begins in a stammer," as "Negus" here exemplifies ("Wringing the Word" 136). First, it emerges out of the colonial tongue. Then, however, the aural qualities of the stammer which draw from the oral tradition of the islands, fashion themselves like the pebble—a natural object which figures prominently throughout Brathwaite's oeuvre—in order to pellet the "red white and blue/... of the dragon" that upholds these "principalities of power" (*The Arrivants* 222). Nathaniel Mackey says of this "return to the



pebble,” “[Brathwaite] return[s] to the smallest particles of language, syllables and letters, he assaults the apparent solidity and integrity of words, destabilizing them (showing them to be intrinsically unstable) by emphasizing the points at which they break, disassembling them and reassembling them in alternate spellings and neologistic coinages” (“Wringing the Word” 137). Thus, Mackey’s analytical framework allows for the consideration of the stoning at work in “Negus” as part and parcel of the nation-binding calypso. *Rites of Passage*, the first section of *The Arrivants*, features the poem “Calypso” which contains the following geologic creation metaphor for the Caribbean:

The stone had skidded arc’d and bloomed into islands:  
Cuba and San Domingo  
Jamaica and Puerto Rico  
Grenada Guadeloupe Bonaire (*The Arrivants* 48).

Therefore, the same pebble which dismantles also metaphorically constructs the arch of the New World Islands. In reference to this poem, “Calypso,” Brathwaite claims that “in order to break down the pentameter” one must “[discover] the calypso” (“English in the Caribbean” 24). He has been vocal about his conscious use of the dactyl—a metric form common in calypsoes—in order to mimic the natural movement of the Caribbean tongue (24). There is, in essence then, a performative aspect to the consolidation of the calypso and nation language—as they “mandate the use of the tongue in a certain way” (24). J. Edward Chamberlin claims that the voices of this performative nation language exhibit an “avant-garde allusiveness and intertextual homogenization of modernism but also a new focus on language that crosses boundaries and hovers between determinants in the discourses of poet, poem and reader, as well as of the street and the salon” (Chamberlin 37). It is in this introduction to the avant-garde that one can situate the literary calypso and Brathwaites aesthetic activity. And, though seemingly contradictory, it is

through the blueprint of the literary calypso that Brathwaite creates an avant-garde standard, which Massiah and those of the present moment will come to challenge.

Brathwaite fashions an avant-garde ideal out of the literary calypso that will render later poems that exhibit similar features subject to association with it. Lauri Ramey defines the avant-garde historically as “an assertively and strategically antithetical response to the conventional modes of aesthetic expression, the exploitation of formal properties such as unstable lyric subject positions, anti-narrative strategies to problematise imagery of wholeness and closure in the art object...non-referential employment of language, collage and fragmentation” (Ramey 79). Each of these qualities abound in Brathwaite’s work. But, perhaps central to his employment of the avant-garde is the insistence on musical reference in the quest for liberation or political reform. His poem “Circle(s)” from his 2010 collection, *Elegguas*, begins, “Music will never fly out of your green horn in squares/ nor out of your harp nor out of your thumb pianos/ because it does not grow on cottonwool plantations” (*Elegguas* 13). The last line reads, with the referent being music, “it is that reggae reggae riddim that Xplodes the prison burns the clock” (*Elegguas* 13). Here, Brathwaite boldly expresses several aspects of the avant-garde form. The first of these is a lack of closure due to the “Xplo[sion]” at the poem’s end. In addition, the subject, “Music,” appears once at the very head of the poem and never again, employing the pronoun “it” sporadically or leaving only a period with space on either side in the pronoun’s place— “deep bone . bringin our riddim home” (*Elegguas* 13). However, the ending depicts music as the means of deliverance from imprisonment. This directive that music performs the political task on behalf of the poem necessarily imagines their inherent difference despite Brathwaite’s concerted efforts, and success, at their synthesis. This will be the point of

contention for black poets in Britain as they attempt to dissociate music from these necessary affiliations set by Brathwaite's avant-garde standard.

### III. James Massiah and the New Black Poetic Avant-Garde

‘To be or not to be’ that is the question/ my G and it fucks with me eternally.

—James Massiah, “Skull and Phone,” *Euthanasia Party/Twenty Seven*

In May of 2017, I had the opportunity to travel to London in order to investigate some of the larger questions I had about black London’s poetic antecedents. I worked backwards, stumbling first upon a piece by James Massiah, a contemporary South London born poet of Caribbean heritage, rather early on in my search. Keeping in mind Brathwaite and other black Caribbean and African scholars I had encountered during my undergraduate career, I came to Massiah’s work with somewhat of a shallow background in black efforts to decolonize literature in English. So, when I became acquainted with James Massiah’s “A Real Poem (aka Not Spoken Word),” which seeks to deconstruct then re-define the necessary racial associations married to poetry in its oral and written formats, I saw what could perhaps be a logical link between the subversive politics of Brathwaite (and as I would later find out, CAM’s) work and the present moment as demonstrated by James Massiah. Massiah and those who follow his work note that its themes of morality, mortality, and sex are informed by his philosophical interests in nihilism. In fact, West Indian poetics and postcolonial theory are scarcely explicitly mentioned by Massiah in interviews or in his texts. However, this does not negate the implicit kinship between the two authors and their respective philosophies. As many similarities as Massiah and Brathwaite share in the function of their individual texts—that is, work meant to destabilize the significance of the standard English word—there still remains a critical difference between the two. Where Brathwaite’s work exhibits a dependency on the word in the definition of nation language,

Massiah's work does not as it indicates that nation language can achieve the same intended effect without the imperative that the written and aural are distinguishable.

Massiah considers the exclusionary nature of poetry as poetry or, seemingly, not poetry based on its adherence to the standard dialect and form, and in doing so he deconstructs the mandate that poetry be expressed with all the formalities of the written word—no matter how divergent it is from the standard form. Massiah contemplates the same question posed by Hamlet, which appears on numerous occasions throughout Brathwaite's body of critical writing: "To be or not to be." Like Brathwaite, Massiah begins with the model of linguistic expression in English—Shakespeare's free verse—"in order to break down the pentameter" ("English in the Caribbean" 24). "Skull and Phones," the twelfth track on Massiah's *Euthanasia Party/Twenty Seven*, encapsulates this "crisis of choice" posed by the question "to be or not to be" through an extended metaphor of death in the digital age. The narrator states, "You are the royal flesh/ heir to the throne/ not quite ready to be pale white/ skull and bones" ("Skull and Phones"). A few lines later, the addressed continues, "'To be or not to be' that is the question/ my G and it fucks with me eternally" ("Skull and Phones"). Massiah's work exhibits some of the distinctive "contradictory impulses" of Brathwaite's literary calypso. Namely, "Skull and Phones" shows an outward interest in protecting the form from the external forces of "cultural erosion" (Rohlehr 83), which may in fact foreground a sort of racial and cultural death as one becomes "pale white/ skull and bones" ("Skull and Phones"). In addition, this passage is embroiled in the quest for self-definition that shapes much of the work of West Indian poets in England and in the Caribbean as he deliberates on which side of the coin he should fall—standard or non-standard, poet or musician. Brathwaite contends that the sound of West Indian poetry contributes to its

meaning, as “the poetry...exists not in a dictionary but in the tradition of the spoken word” (“English in the Caribbean 24). This still draws a necessary distinction between the two, as the sound, separate from the word, sets nation language apart from the mainstream—nation language, of course, errs on the side of “not to be” standard. However, it is clear that, for Massiah, the question alone is the problem and may be a contributing factor to the death of the poet as he says the question “fucks with [him] eternally” (“Skull and Phones”). Since Massiah produces poetry outside of the standard dialect and does so with the aid of distinctly black British musical expression, it is clear that he does not wholly reject its utility in the production of dissenting opinion. As such, he does not break from Brathwaite’s nation language and literary calypso, but rather he updates it for an established black British community that seeks to address the further estrangement of black poets who engage in performance and musical enterprises from the category of “real poet”

At present, Massiah interrogates the constitution of real poetry, demolishing the relevance of any particular formula as they often become an instrument for black exclusion. “A Real Poem (aka NOT Spoken Word)” seems to come into direct conflict with Brathwaite’s theory of orality being necessary to black Caribbean poetics. The poem begins with a rejection of the terms “spoken-word artist” and “spoken-word poem.” An off-camera antagonist, staged most likely for the purposes of presenting the antithesis to Massiah’s ideal, introduces the South London poet. A debate ensues which then seamlessly threads into the body of the poem. The initial exchange is as follows:

Off-camera: So, we’re here with James Massiah, spoken-word artist...

Massiah: No, no just poet is fine.

Off-camera: Sorry, we're here with James Massiah, spoken-word poet...

Massiah: No, just poet. Just poet.

Off-camera: Alright, we're here with James Massiah, who is a poet, who is going to do some spoken-word performance.

Massiah: No, see, this is just a poem, you know. This is a real poem. ("A Real Poem (aka NOT Spoken Word)")

Here, Massiah appears frustrated with the term "spoken word" as though it has no place in the description of the poem he will then recite for the camera. If anything, this passage illustrates that Massiah favors an integrationist model—as he dissociates himself from one of the distinguishing features of black poetry to this point. In a talk Massiah gave after the YouTube release of this poem, he illuminates his reasoning for the poem:

I wrote [A Real Poem] because I was aware of the fact that within the world of poetry there is a desire to segment it off. So, it's almost like if you're wealthy, old, or white, you are a poet. And if you are black, or working class...you're a spoken word artist or you're a performance poet. And in my mind, it creates a hierarchy between the real poets and the pretenders, which I'm not very fond of.

When I was introduced to poetry as a child, that was what I wanted to be. I never wanted to be a spoken word artist. It was always poetry. ("The Real World")

True enough, this demonstrates a similar resistance to white power and linguistic structures that have informed much of the organizing and poetic expression of black Briton's poetic forebears. However, Massiah's argumentation away from the term "spoken word artist" does seem to be "‘hitting up against’ the tradition of revolutionary poetics," in the words of Professor Andrene

Taylor, that preceded his own (Taylor 16). Brathwaite, as the architect of the radical literary Calypso, was one of the primary figures of 20th-century avant-garde aesthetic practice as he responded in turn not only to white people but also the older generation of Caribbean poets “because of their attachment to ‘pre-independence entrenchment, based on the old lessons—those of the single validity of the European prototype’” (Ramey 81). As James Berry, put it, the late-20th century nation language poet was just as invested in contending with the “Black Prime Ministers an’ professors and all top people don’ get whe’ them is talkin’ bad talk like we” (James Berry qtd in Ramey 81). But, in doing so, these ancestors created a new standard—a “tradition of revolutionary poetics” (Taylor 17). Massiah’s “A Real Poem (NOT Spoken Word)” reflects that the mid-to-late-20th century imperative to found a new black consciousness expressed through poetics opposed to the established form may well have further contributed to the subordination of black poets in Britain, a sentiment which seems evident in Massiah’s speech. The poem continues:

This poem is not for YouTube

It is for school

This poem is intentionally uncool

This poem is intended to teach you the rules by sticking by them

This poem is the yardstick by which all literature should be judged (“A Real Poem (NOT Spoken Word)”)

Massiah offers a tongue-in-cheek critique of poetic norms, acknowledging that this form is both “uncool” and yet “the yardstick by which all literature should be judged.” The intentionality he expresses in crafting this piece in accordance with the standard shows a distinct philosophical



difference from the avant-garde nation language poet. Lauri Ramey notes that for contemporary black British poets, “it is authentic—and possible—to convey new ideas and expressions using British literary traditions” (Ramey 98). Massiah conveys that integration rather than separation is the means by which legitimacy is achieved. “A Real Poem (aka NOT Spoken Word)” continues, “This poem is for any channel/that’s trying to up its diversity quota/because it’s written by a black kid/ although not entirely sure whether or not/ it actually sounds like it” (“A Real Poem (aka NOT Spoken Word)). Like Brathwaite, Massiah confronts the expectations for Black literary production. However, the requirements have changed based on the influence of nation language poets of Brathwaite’s generation. Now, “‘acceptable’ ‘black’ British poetry...should be performative with a linear narrative, that it call for class- and race-based social interventions, and that it employ techniques and imagery directly discussing dual identities and cultural tensions” (Ramey 88). Therefore, the question driving the poetic project for the newest generation has changed. To reiterate, Brathwaite, CAM, and others involved in their cause asked how a conscious politicized dialect might buttress the foundation for an emerging black identity and how an adherence to vernacular poetry/music may further liberate them from the tyranny of the colonial structure. Massiah (and those of the present moment) engages with this standard set for him by his predecessors and eventually rejects it by dismantling the very definition of poetry, thereby creating the space for his work where previously it might have been excluded.

By discrediting any formal definition of poetry, James Massiah creates an environment where his work cannot be precluded from any creative domain. Through early personal correspondence with myself, Massiah answered a question I had concerning the connection between “real poetry” and his music. He began, “I tend to play my own music and poetry during

the sets. More often now the line between a DJ set, a live set and a poetry set is blurring for me, relative to the space or time that I'm playing" ("Re: Questions for Thesis"). Of course, this seems a reincarnation of the bridge which Brathwaite carefully constructed between West Indian poetry and calypso—a bond which extends beyond the simple duplication of calypso specific rhythms on the page. However, he continued:

It's worth mentioning that nihilism, specifically moral nihilism, brought me to view my work the way that I do. So rather than thinking, 'Is this a good poem?' or song or DJ set, the question is about whether or not I like it and if it's in my interest to perform it or publish it or play it...The question can extend to definition, so not only what is a good poem but what even *is* a poem. There is the idea of a shared language or shared understanding of what makes a poem a poem and not a rap or an essay or a shopping list or a DJ set a DJ set and not a live performance, but it's in knowing what the collective definition of a thing is and determining whether or not it's in your interest to define or be defined in the same way. ("Re: Questions for Thesis")

While philosophical inquiry is not the primary function of this analysis, it is necessary to note that Massiah has been clear that his philosophical investments have led him to question the reality of the poem. That is to say, due to his alignment with nihilism, he has adopted an acute skepticism through which he questions whether words even exist— he wonders what the concrete reality of the poem is if its particles are meaningless in their truest essence. His work reflects this interrogative philosophical practice more so than it does the political project of earlier black revolutionary poetics, but in so doing it also broadens the definition of the

revolutionary avant-garde. Andrene Taylor says, “Today, Black British writing does not reflect the same level of political and social urgency as past revolutionary movements. Perhaps, what is revolutionary about Black British writing today is that young writers are not just writing to ‘confront the contradictions arising out of the Black man’s experience in the racist West’ ...but, instead, they are writing to expand the meaning of revolutionary black writing” (Taylor 28). James Massiah meets this new imperative by deconstructing the form of the standard poem and reconstituting its meaning. He does not predicate the use of vernacular as the subversive element, but rather by demonstrating the complete dissociation of the term poetry from its accepted definitions on all fronts.

Massiah’s poetic deconstructivism begins with the format of his live shows, which feature grime and funk as individual concepts capable of conveying what words might, and culminates with the publication of his first poetry collection, *Euthanasia Party/ Twenty Seven*. On 11 May 2017, I had the pleasure of attending James Massiah’s “Poætry Session III” at Platform Southwark on London’s Southbank. The darkened art installation space had small lights hung to weakly ward away the prevailing darkness in the room. Stools were set up opposite to the DJ table almost imitating the bench before the masterpiece common in museums or galleries. This was my introduction to Massiah’s work and his particular brand of poetry, and while I was not completely aware of the intricacies of the rest of his work yet, I was aware that this was a transgressive endeavor that aimed for the legibility of the poetry therein across the boundaries of cultural production—literature and visual art, and literature and music. That evening the poets—including Ella Rimer, Hector Aponysus, Soph LS, as well as James Massiah himself—recited words off paper, from their phones, and out of their memory all over beats produced by DJs

COVCO and Coby Sey. The DJ and the poets communicated seemingly through sound as the poet attempted to meet the beat the DJ adjusted for the poet. Upon later investigation, I gathered that this might be a product of reggae dub poetry, of which Kamau Brathwaite is commonly thought to be the father (though he was never a dub poet himself) (“An Interview with Kamau Brathwaite” 27). However, Brathwaite says that within the dub poetry that many claim is influenced by his work, the poets “thought that they were first and only poets” and that there was a “disjuncture, lack of continuity, ignorance of that continuity” (“An Interview with Kamau Brathwaite” 27). This, of course, was not the case with Massiah and his compatriots at present. In Massiah’s poem, “A New Scene,” from his 2017 collection, the narrator invokes the sun, acknowledging the ancestral past but ultimately looking towards the future:

To a new scene  
 And an old sayin’  
 There is nothing new under the sun  
 That’s why we started gettin’ high  
 And so we rise (*Euthanasia Party/ Twenty Seven*)

With this poem occurring relatively early on in the collection, Massiah starts with the sun where Brathwaite ended *The Arrivants* with “Jou’Vert.” Based on Massiah’s musings on this “new scene,” perhaps there is not enough room for the current crop of black writers in Britain to flourish under the same critical theory exacted by Brathwaite at the dawn of a new black nationalism. Massiah demonstrates that perhaps the latest iteration of this consciousness does not predicate itself on the subversive synthesis of two genres—poetry and music—as this subscribes to the conventional belief that they are inherently disjointed, as Brathwaite said of dub poets, and

that their synthesis must occur out of a concerted effort and with the aid of a unifying crossover element, i.e. the literary calypso. Based on his body of work, contemporary black poetics need not be bound by fixed definitions, and this freedom creates an environment in which the entirety of their cultural output feeds into their poetic vision.

Massiah's poetry does not invalidate the important cultural work done by Brathwaite and those of the CAM generation, instead it situates a new black avant-garde that is founded on multiple relationships, namely ones informed by his philosophical attachments, in order to make new space for black poets. Massiah's "Poëtry Sessions" feature a complete fluidity between poetry and music (grime/funk specifically). Some of his solo DJ sets do not include any oral component, like one I attended at the Five Miles club in London on the 28th of May 2017. However, this does not mean that he is completely out of sync with Brathwaite and others. Lauri Ramey says of the avant-garde, "This diasporic poetry may be a call to reconsider what have now become predictable and rigidified definitions of avant-garde practice" (Ramey 98). She continues, "One would expect the truly avant-garde to refer to something not seen before, rather than to recycle a cliché" (Ramey 98). That is to say, Massiah and his peers constitute the foundation of a new avant-garde that contends with the previous standard, but ultimately breaks free of the cyclical nature of black poetic tradition, forging its own path in the present.

## Conclusion

At only 27 years old, James Massiah thoroughly engages with an established tradition of black poetic avant-gardism, which is not easily mutable due to its beginnings as the voice of colonial resistance. His work speaks to a rejection of the definitions imposed by the dominant culture but also by nation language poets. Based on Massiah, it seems that the nature of black British writing is cyclical—a continuous effort to free oneself and the community from all categories of exclusion. The models being either total separatism based on linguistic difference or integration grounded in rejection of formal definition. Each, of course, results in a new space for black poetics.

There is still an inordinate amount left to be said on this topic. Although he frequently performed at events prior to this date, James Massiah only published *Euthanasia Party/ Twenty Seven* quite recently on the 27 October 2017. On the scope of this analysis, the comparison of Kamau Brathwaite and James Massiah, when considering his new volume of work, furnished an extensive debate about the nature of black poetics across time. As such, there is still more meaning to be gleaned from the relationship between Brathwaite's ideologies and Massiah's philosophical leanings. Of his principles' relationship to his poetry, Massiah said to me during our correspondence, "there is a connection, that it's all coming from same nihilistic ideology. The sense of immorality, the leaning towards "dark" or taboo subjects and sounds, the importance of funk, grime and slackness as ideas and not just genres, the way in which those rhythms impact my writing" ("Re: Questions for Thesis"). Not only is there room to study themes of "darkness"—death playing a pivotal role in both Brathwaite and Massiah's work—but more

could be said concretely about the origins of UK Grime/Funk and their place in the new black poetic avant-garde.

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